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By Frank Legato

Family Feud!

Silicon Gaming creates a series of bonus slots premiering at MGM with perhaps the most clever game-show theme yet.



Strolling the floor of the cavernous MGM Grand in Las Vegas is a mind-boggling experience—a collage of sights and sounds that bombards the senses with competing colors, lights, bells, sound effects, spinning reels and clanging hoppers. Occasionally though, something really pops out of the din to command your attention.

There is one huge and compelling new slot area at the MGM that you simply cannot miss while walking through the casino—blue and gold decor, with colorful and curious slot machines that match, spreading in a huge semicircle from a central video wall.

It is home to "Family Feud," a new series of bonus slot games designed and built specifically for MGM by Silicon Gaming.

Based on the award-winning TV game show, the Family Feud series includes three separate styles of games. One is a standard nine-line video slot; one is a multi-deck video poker game in the "Five Play" format; and the other is a re-spin video slot, similar to Silicon's "Hot Reels" game.

All are on Silicon's new and improved multimedia platform, featuring the powerful computer-generated features, live video and 3-D animation that Silicon Gaming is known for. The normal, PC-like Odyssey cabinets are replaced by color-coordinated, slant-top cabinets modified with lights and an extra video "game board" screen facing the player.

There are plenty of machines available in each of the three configurations—61 games in all, in a 3,500 sq. ft. themed area. A giant painted sculpture of comedian Louie Anderson, host of the current incarnation of the Family Feud TV show, stands in the middle of the circular carousel as an attraction to the area.

However, the film clips are what really grab your attention—at least at first. In the center of the area, visible from practically all of the individual games, is a wall of video on which continuous clips from the entire run of Family Feud are shown—including the popular original show hosted by Richard Dawson.

'Wagering Attraction'

Family Feud is the first launch of a product designed in what Silicon calls a "Wagering Attraction" package developed for a specific operator. Andrew Pascal, the company's president and CEO, says the company plans to offer such exclusives to other operators as a way to distinguish their slot floors from those of their competitors.

"Family Feud is a Silicon Gaming product with a new model for business venture that we took to MGM," says Pascal. "It fits in with their philosophy, which is to offer the ultimate entertainment experience to their customers. We thought we had a special concept, and they were very excited about it."

MGM Grand, with its "City of Entertainment" brand and slogan, was the perfect venue for an attraction of this nature, says William Hornbuckle, the resort's president and chief operating officer. "For us, it is the first significant attempt to bring the City of Entertainment to life on the casino floor," Hornbuckle says. "We've obviously branded ourselves with the slogan, and I believe we've done a good job in carrying through. But on our casino floor, we are bringing the realm of what is beyond the norm to our customers."

Silicon developed the slot games and designed and built the entire

themed area, including the video wall, the color scheme and even the Louie Anderson sculpture. MGM provides the ample floor space and puts its formidable financial muscle behind the promotion of the games. (The operator leases the machines themselves from Silicon.)

Silicon's development team knew both the area and the games themselves would have to be special to live up to a commitment of this much floor space at a flagship Strip casino resort. "I don't know that this much space has ever been devoted to one game," says Pascal. "That's why we developed several different games in the theme; it had to have broad appeal. It is a boutique casino inside a casino. We needed people to walk through that space knowing that whatever their interest, we could satisfy it."

The space itself was designed to grab the attention. "You have to attract someone to your game if you want them to spend any time with it," Pascal says. "We tried to create a strong read. We wanted people to feel like they were stepping onto the sound stage where the Family Feud show is produced."

For the games themselves, Silicon pulled out all the stops in maximizing the potential of their new platform. The development effort started with painstaking research, according to Pascal. "We looked at all the slot games out there today, and studied symbol sets, behavior of symbols and the math of the games. We tried to get a sense of how the combinations were mapped on the reels, so we would have a high frequency and win frequency that offer a really great game for the player."

The reel-based games feature high payback percentages. The standard multiline video version—a nine-line game in both nickels and quarters, available in 45-coin or 90-coin configuration—ranges from 92 percent to 94 percent overall payback. The multi-reel, re-spin game is even better, ranging from 96 percent to 98 percent payback—one of the fairest bets on the slot floor.

This multi-reel percentage, moreover, can be maximized by the skill factor. Similar to Silicon's "Hot Reels," the screen displays three sets of three reels each. The player must bet at least three coins to activate all three reel sets. The bottom reels spin to a combination. The player has the option of holding any or all of the reels and re-spinning the remaining reel or reels to shoot for the highest possible jackpot.

The math of the video poker version—available in Jacks or Better, Bonus Poker or Deuces Wild games—is a bit more difficult to discern. Because of the random bonus awards, the base pay tables on the games are less generous than video poker experts or pros will like. The payback percentages range from 96 percent to 99 percent.

But Silicon met an even bigger challenge in creating the masterful bonus game, which is triggered by three special reel symbols in the video slots

or by any four-of-a-kind hand in the video poker version.

The challenge was to create a random bonus event with the look and feel of a television game show that is based on skill and knowledge, while re-creating the TV experience for longtime fans of the show.

Family Feud was created in the mid '70s by ABC television producer Mark Goodson. It began its first nine-year run in 1976 with Dawson hosting a daily competition between two families to guess the most popular responses to a variety of general-knowledge questions in an audience survey.

There were always enthusiastic shouts of encouragement from the studio audience, as well as among the family members on each team—a festive atmosphere. Dawson would ask the questions, and a family member would give what he or she thought most of the audience members would answer. The host would then reveal how many of the surveyed audience members gave the same answer. (“Survey says...”) Responses that matched audience responses would appear on a large game board in order of preference; a loud buzzer would sound if a contestant gave a response that matched none of the survey responses.

The format earned Family Feud an Emmy Award in 1977 and a run as the number-one rated game show on daytime television. (The new syndicated version of the show, hosted by Anderson, premiered last year.)

Creating a slot bonus game simulating all this was a bit more tricky. A large enough database of questions and answers to maintain interest would have to be created. The bonus awards associated with various responses would have to parallel the difficulty of each question and perhaps most importantly, the outcome of the bonus game would have to be presented in a way that was authentic enough to mask its randomness.

The new platform, with a few new twists, was up to the task. The finished product has a video display facing the player that lights up to look just like the game board used on the TV show—the vertical row of plaques that indicate the rank of each answer.

Silicon made one of its most clever additions to the Odyssey format to add player interaction to the bonus round. To the right of the main video screen is a small replica of a television camera. It is a real camera that captures the image of the player and incorporates it into the game screen during the bonus round.

When the bonus round is triggered, the red light atop the TV camera goes on as the main screen turns black. A live-action video image of “stage manager” appears on a screen in the camera’s window. The manager says, “Okay, player...Look over here. We are ready to go in 5

4, 3, 2..." The camera snaps the player's picture as an "On Air" light flashes.

The main screen then goes into a sequence simulating the TV show. On fictitious "family" is introduced—a typical family pictured in an old-time portrait, the same way contestants are introduced on the program. The family's opponent, the other "contestant," is introduced—you. The player's image, captured by the little camera, appears on the screen. The announcer shouts the familiar, "Let's play the Feud!" to the cheers of the crowd and the TV show's theme music.

The screen displays a survey question, and an image of the answer plaque spins around. The player is prompted to stop it by pushing a button—one of the answers appears, to sounds of audience encouragement such as "Good answer!" The announcer shouts the familiar, "Survey says..." If it is one of the top four answers, it appears with a "ding" on the board, along with a bonus amount corresponding to its rank in the survey. If it is not one of the survey answers, you hear the "buzz" as an "X" flashes over the bonus board. (You also hear the audience go, "Awww.")



The bonus round repeats with more answers until all four of the top answers are displayed, or until the player gets three "X" marks. The accumulated award then goes to the credit meter.

According to Pascal, the Family Feud bonus game, like the slots themselves, is the product of extensive research

and teamwork.

"We were looking for something that would really attract the average player, so we said, 'Let's put the people on the show,'" he says. "People have a romantic view of what it's like to be on a TV show, and the team discussed ways to reproduce that. That's how we came to what we call the 'On-Air Bonus.'"

For the bonus game itself, the team compiled a database of over 1,000 questions and answers—all from the actual show during its entire run. Pascal notes that while the player is not guessing the answers, the experience of watching the show is reproduced effectively.

"You are definitely playing along," he says. "The way we paced the answers allows you to decide whether you think it was one of the top answers in the survey. If you think it is, the anticipation builds for a big award value."

In all, it is a faithful reproduction of the entire atmosphere of the Family Feud television show, and it is in one bonus game that still permits a lot of variety in game choice for the player.

The Wagering Attraction area is already up and running at the MGM Grand. At press time, plans were to install the game at other MGM-owned properties—initially, New York-New York and the Primadonna resorts in Primm, Nev.

According to MGM's Hornbuckle, initial numbers have been "tremendous," with enough customers flocking to the games in the initial weeks to more than justify the substantial commitment of floor space. "They are rivaling the Wheel of Fortune games in terms of numbers," he says. "In addition to the 61 games dedicated currently, we are bringing in two six-game pods to be placed near the entrance on the New York-New York side, and near the restaurant promenade."

He adds that MGM is viewing this as the first of several dedicated areas. "If this continues as we hope, we envision two or three of these interactive zones in the casino," Hornbuckle says.

MGM has the exclusive on the game in its core markets, but Pascal says the company plans to export it to markets in which MGM does not operate, such as California and Northern Nevada.

Otherwise, Pascal says, Silicon will continue to offer new branded "Wagering Attractions" to all of the major operators—he notes that Silicon has secured licenses on other popular brands that can be transformed into slot games in the future.

Meanwhile, see you at "the Feud."

Family Feud

Slot Type:

Multimedia video gaming machine available as nine-line, multi-coin video slot, multi-reel video slot with re-spin feature, or video poker game; interactive secondary bonus game on primary and secondary video screens; nickel and quarter denominations

Payback % range:

Multiline version: 92.00%-94.00%

Multi-reel re-spin version: 96.00%-98.00%

Video poker version: 97.00%-99.00%

Average Hit Frequency:

Multiline version: Every 2-3 spins (45.3%)

Multi-reel re-spin version: Every 2-3 spins (41%)

Video poker version: Every 2 hands (45%)

Top Jackpot:

Multiline version: 20,000 coins

Multi-reel re-spin version: 6,000 coins

Video poker version: 4,000 coins

Availability:

MGM Grand Hotel and Casino, Las Vegas (New York-New York and Primadonna Resorts pending)



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